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# Understanding, Respect, and Collaboration in Cultural Heritage Preservation: A Conservator's Developing Perspective

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## ABSTRACT

Attitudes appear to be changing in the museum world about the preservation of cultural objects and of the cultures to which these objects are connected. The intangible nature of cultural objects is being addressed and is seen as equal in importance to, or in some cases greater, than an object's tangible nature. This significant trend in cultural heritage preservation is increasingly evident in professional conferences, publications, and discussions, and is beginning to have an impact on preservation methodologies. It is affecting the way preservation professionals approach their work and manage collections. Understanding, respect, and collaboration are more important than ever in carrying out work. Understanding all aspects of the nature of the significance of objects, respecting an object's intangible as well as tangible nature, and collaborating in a meaningful way with the cultural groups to which the items are connected are playing an increasingly prominent role.

In this article I shall address a few of the insights I have gained regarding cultural heritage preservation. I will talk about cultural considerations in the care of objects, particularly those of indigenous people, and the questions these considerations raise for all of us who are charged with the protection of cultural heritage. Because I shall be discussing cultures different from mine, I will use the voices of people from those various cultures as much as possible. My examples will be mostly American Indian, but I shall refer in more general terms to other cultures as well. Of course the specific practices of different cultures vary, but the considerations and issues these practices raise are similar. I would like to acknowledge at the outset the American Indian people who provided gracious and

patient guidance to me and whose wisdom is reflected in many of the words quoted.

## PUBLIC DISCOURSE

At its general conference in October 2003 the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) adopted its *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*. The International Council of Museums (ICOM) chose the theme of *Museums and Intangible Heritage* for its twentieth conference in 2004, basing it on UNESCO's definition of intangible heritage as "the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills . . . that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage" (UNESCO, 2003, p. 2). At the ICOM meeting O. Young Lee, Adviser, *Joong Ang Daily*, Former Minister of Culture, government of Korea, and Honorary Professor, Ewha Womans University, Republic of Korea, stated that for museum professionals "the discourse is shifting from tangible to intangible cultural assets" (Lee, 2004, p. 5). Today most museums deal with the tangible and, as Lee (2004) noted, "people are now so used to the exhibitions put on by museums that they are more interested in the objects contained in the display cabinets than in the minds of the people who created the objects" (p. 5). At the same conference, Director Richard Kurin, Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage at the Smithsonian Institution, USA Supervisor, Smithsonian Folklife Festival, explained:

The primary difference in dealing with intangible cultural heritage [versus tangible] is that the "thing" or "object" is the social practice or tradition—not a material object, recording, written transcription, photograph or videotape. It is the singing of songs in the community, the spiritual beliefs of a people, the knowledge of navigating by the stars and weaving meaningful patterns into cloth. (Kurin, 2004, p. 7)

Lee (2004) voiced concern that many countries in the world "do not even have the concept of intangible culture. They do not have any policies regarding intangible cultural assets, and as a result many intangible cultural assets are, at this precise moment, being abandoned and disappearing before our very eyes" (p. 6).

In June 2006, the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (AIC) devoted the general session of its annual meeting to the topic of "using artifacts," which for many cultures is necessary in order to preserve the intangible nature of the objects, and asked the question "is conservation compromised?" Professor Amareswar Galla, of the Australian National University and the University of Queensland, gave the keynote address. He explored shifting the paradigm of preservation so that both tangible and intangible heritage come together, along with cul-

tural diversity and sustainable development, to form an integrated heritage management model (Galla, 2006, p. 1).

## PERSONAL BACKGROUND

Although I have traveled to various parts of the world and been introduced to different cultures, the concept of the tangible versus intangible in preservation first became a serious issue for me in the care of American Indian objects. As a conservator and consultant, I occasionally had been asked to provide assistance in the care of these. The methods and techniques I suggested were always based on standard museum practice. But often, it seemed, my suggestions did not meet the cultural needs of the objects and were impractical given the situation in which they existed. I was glad that tribal methods of care were still practiced.

Yet there appeared to be a need for additional practical information, especially as tribal museums and cultural centers grew in number. One thing led to another, and in collaboration with many people I edited a book intended to address this need, *Caring for American Indian Objects: A Practical and Cultural Guide* (Ogden, 2004).<sup>1</sup> The book is based on standard museum practice and includes a section on cultural considerations, which is written by American Indian people. It was during this project that I became aware of how important cultural considerations are.

When I first thought about doing this project, I interviewed several American Indian people. I asked if a book like this would be useful, and I asked what topics they would like addressed and what questions they wanted answered. I was concerned that this book might be unnecessary; objects clearly have lasted for generations by tribal methods of care, so standard museum methods and techniques might not be needed. But the American Indians I consulted felt it was useful for the people who make decisions about the care of objects to have as much information as possible, and that the book would be helpful.

## UNDERSTANDING

One of the cultural differences between American Indian people and non-Indian museum professionals relates to the *concept* of preservation. It seems to me, as a conservator trained according to standard museum practice, that many conservation professionals tend to see all types of cultural items as objects or artifacts, often created as works of art, beauty, or craftsmanship, that have some special value in and of themselves. Each item is experienced as an individual object of study or beauty, separate and isolated from human society. Proper care of an item often means finding a way to preserve it so that it can be seen and studied, but not used or handled, and the conservator's primary responsibility is to preserve the item's artifactual or physical integrity. In short, preservation is all about the object, or the tangible cultural heritage.

American Indian people, on the other hand, tend to see a cultural item not as an *object* but as a functional item that is part of a human society and useful to it. In fact, the choice of words here is revealing. When collaborating on the book, *Joe Horse Capture* (A'Aninin [Gros Ventre]), Associate Curator, Minneapolis Institute of Arts, indicated that he was uncomfortable with the use of the word *object*. He explained that the more that word is used, the more an item becomes an object and the less it is seen as what it is—a part of everyday life. For American Indian people, the item is seen as part of the culture from which it comes and is inseparable from it. Proper care is seen as a way of preserving the lifeways of a people, not of preserving objects. Preservation is all about people and human societies, or the intangible cultural heritage. Jill Norwood (Polowa/Yurok/Karuk), Community Services Specialist, Museum Training Program, National Museum of the American Indian, explains this poignantly:

As an American Indian museum professional at the National Museum of the American Indian, I have seen the bittersweet emotions of sadness and joy that arise when Native people view cultural materials in our storage facilities. These community representatives often struggle to show museum staff that their cultural materials are not inanimate things but have life within them; it is hard for them to see the materials in such a clinical setting. Therefore I ask museum professionals everywhere to be respectful when speaking about Native cultural materials. (Norwood, 2006, p. 25)

Miriam Clavir, formerly the senior conservator at the Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia, explores these cultural differences in her book *Preserving What Is Valued: Museums, Conservation, and First Nations* (2002), and she provides several comparisons of the different approaches. She explains this in the introduction to the book:

Conservators approach preserving the cultural significance of a heritage object by preserving its physical integrity (which they can “read” through scientific evidence) and its aesthetic, historic, and conceptual integrity (which is interpreted through scholarship in related disciplines as well as “read” through physical evidence). Many First Nations, on the other hand, view the preservation of the cultural significance of a heritage object as inseparable from the preservation of traditions, oral history, community, and identity as First Nations; preservation is about people, and objects have their role in cultural preservation. The “juncture of impasses” that prompted me to write this book concerned whether or not it is possible to balance the preservation of the physical integrity of First Nations collections in museums with the preservation of their conceptual integrity—an integrity that derives from the living culture from which the objects originate. (p. xvii)

So, whereas the goal of non-Indians is primarily to preserve the item, the goal of American Indian people is to preserve the culture of which the item is just one part. And this culture is an oral one rather than one with

written records. This basic difference is especially apparent when considering why items should be preserved. Kathryn "Jody" Beaulieu (Anishinabe/Ojibwe), director and NAGPRA representative,<sup>2</sup> Red Lake Tribal Library and Archives, explains:

American Indians have been viewed as a vanishing people. What if our cultural objects had not been preserved? Memories are sparked by them, and we learn through the oral history of our elders. Objects assist in having memories flourish. Elders see objects, and then stories flow from them, and younger Indians learn. (as cited in Ogden, 2004, p. 3)

Faith Bad Bear (Crow/Sioux), formerly an assistant curator of ethnology at the Science Museum of Minnesota, points out the importance of these items in teaching the culture to American Indian children:

Our cultural items from the past are important. They tell us why things were done back then. It's important that the children of the Tribes understand this. It is important for the children to learn from us. . . . Some items are meant to deteriorate and should be left to deteriorate naturally. Some are not. Those that are not should be used to educate our children. (as cited in Ogden, 2004, p. 82)

Executive Director Dr. Sven Haakanson Jr. (Alutiiq-Sugpiaq) of the Alutiiq Museum and Archeological Repository, describes items as "clues to our cultural past" (Haakanson, 2004, p. 5) and sums up their importance in preserving the culture. He says:

American Indian cultural items are more than objects of art or representations of primitive peoples. They are cultural links between the past, present, and future for specific groups of people. Additionally they may be the only history we have for these Native peoples. The items contain implicit information about how traditional materials were made into objects that were used everyday to fulfill both practical and ceremonial needs. What we can learn from these items is how our ancestors viewed their world, how they treated animals, and how they respected their ancestors. Most important, we can use these items to preserve our culture and bring this knowledge into a living context that continues to be passed on from generation to generation, rather than be tucked away in a book, archived, or hidden in a museum collection. (Haakanson, 2004, p. 5-6)

Understanding some of the reasons American Indian people believe objects should be preserved clarifies cultural differences related to the use of them. Whereas non-Indian conservators try to restrict use, which is usually limited to research or display purposes, American Indian people may wear, eat from, smoke, or make music with cultural items. On the subject of use, Laine Thom (Shoshone/Goshiute/Paiute), a park ranger (interpretation) for the Colter Bay Indian Arts Museum, Grand Teton National Park, asserts:

Native American culture is dynamic and always changing. Native ways of thinking in the past, present, and future are connected. Items used in ceremonies from the past are still utilized by contemporary Native American people today. Whatever the item is, it is "alive" and full of spirit. These items connect past, present and future. (Thom, 2004, p. 16)

He also notes:

When most non-Native American persons view these items behind glass [in a display], they think that what they are looking at is from the past and frozen in time. However, they aren't, because much of the time many of the items are still used by contemporary Native people. People who own heirloom pieces often bring out the pieces and use them for social gatherings and for religious purposes. (p. 16)

The need to use items is beginning to be acknowledged by conservators. At the 2006 AIC annual meeting mentioned above, when considering the question "Using artifacts—is conservation compromised?," Malcolm Collum, a conservator who oversees vehicles at the Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village, noted the museum's founding "intention of operating its collections to maximize their interpretive value," and suggested that a formalized and balanced system is needed that allows items to be used while minimizing damage (Collum, 2006, p. 5).

## RESPECT

Another important cultural difference relating to an object's tangible versus intangible nature is the value placed upon respect and the interpretation of this concept. As Bad Bear explains, "everything about us—how we were raised, how we were talked to, how we were taught—everything revolves around respect" (as cited in Ogden, 2004, p. 82), and Char Tullie (Diné/Navajo), formerly the registrar at the Navajo Nation Museum, points out that "When working with cultural objects, the number one thing is to have respect" (as cited in Ogden, 2004, p. 57). This value, which is deeply held by people of many cultures, is central to the cultures of American Indian people and needs to be present in all aspects of museum work, including preservation. It affects the way items are used, handled, and displayed.

It is not enough to employ the best museum practices; museum professionals need to seek information on how to handle items in a manner that is compatible with the appropriate tribal practice. Registrar Joan Thomas (Kiowa), of the Gilcrease Museum, suggests:

With regard to storing objects and handling them, always try to find out as much as you can about their origins. Even if you know only the general area or cultural group from which a particular object originates, this will give you a better idea of how to interact with it. (Thomas, 2004, p. 8)

It is important, however, for non-Indians to recognize that cultural practices differ from tribe to tribe. If possible, Thomas urges, "always contact the tribe of an item's origin to determine the appropriate way to handle it. By going to the source in a respectful way, you will usually get the accurate information you need" (pp. 9–10). She advises further:

The museum and collector should always be aware when adding to their collections that the items they are handling are from a living and vibrant culture. No object exists within a cultural vacuum. There are people who care deeply about how you are handling, displaying, and storing the cultural material in your care. (p. 10)

Respect in the care of cultural items may be most challenging for non-Indian conservators when it involves sacred items. As Alyce Sadongei (Kiowa/Tohono O'Odham), assistant curator for Native American relations at the Arizona State Museum, University of Arizona, asks: "How should these objects be cared for while in museums, and who prescribes the care?" (2004, p. 17). She suggests three different categories of use based on the original purpose of items that conservators may find helpful in clarifying different care practices. These categories are: Physical Use, Symbolic Use, and Life Ending Use. She points out that "some non-tribal museums have elected to apply tribal cultural practices to their existing collections care policies" (p. 18), and she introduces the concepts of active practice and passive accommodation to describe two approaches to this (p. 18). Sadongei explains:

Sacred objects . . . often require special care that cannot be reduced to a list of "do's and don'ts." The very notion of sacred is not static and, in fact, is subject to change. While having such a list or guidelines is appealing, it simplifies the profound nature and purpose of these objects. (p.19)

She provides general guidance in the following words:

In post-NAGPRA years, neutrality can be the most important form of respect that museums can demonstrate. Neutrality takes into account the diversity of human belief and cultural expression and acknowledges that no single belief is privileged over another. For museum professionals, this means providing effective museum standards of care. (p. 19)

Perhaps the concept of respect is violated most often in the display of cultural items. It is not unusual for items that have special meaning for American Indian people, such as sacred ones, to be placed on display. Polly Nordstrand (Hopi), assistant curator for native arts, Denver Art Museum, points to the conflict between culturally sensitive information protected by Indian communities and a museum's role as a public institution:

In many Indian communities, some knowledge is seen as a privilege for the few, not a right for all. Objects as well as images are integral to



this knowledge, especially in ceremonial use. Too often museums have not respected this tradition and have recklessly displayed sensitive items that were never created for public view. (2004, p. 12)

In other words, quoting Bad Bear, "museums should know that there are aspects of our lives that we want to keep to ourselves and not put on display. They should respect that" (as cited in Ogden, 2004, p. 82). This is yet another example of how an object's intangible nature needs to guide its handling and use.

An additional issue is displaying items out of the context of how they were used originally, or without appropriate supporting information. Laine Thom (2004) believes:

American Indian cultural items should be combined with historical and contemporary photographs and graphic text of Native peoples, narrative and commentarial, relevant to the themes of the exhibit. The result of such an exhibit would be an important method of . . . [demonstrating] the ways of life of Native peoples, historically and now. It is important to display items in such a way that their past history and current use are understood in the context of the lifeways of Native peoples. (p. 15).

Nordstrand suggests:

When beginning an exhibit project, you may want to approach the selection of objects by first analyzing your own point of view. Do you see this object as a work of art? As a historic artifact? As a living being? What was the maker's intention in creating this object? Did he or she intend for it to be displayed? Or even preserved beyond its original use? You may also want to consider how your point of view influences the story you are telling the audience. If a ceremonial item is displayed for its aesthetic qualities, are you providing accurate information to the audience? (p. 12)

I recently visited the Museum of Northern Arizona in Flagstaff and saw on display a portion of their collection of more than eight hundred Katsina dolls. Posted on the gallery wall was an explanation of the meaning of the dolls titled *The Hopi and the Katsinam: A Covenant of Trust and Sacrifice*. For me the explanation was revealing and moving, particularly the two paragraphs from it that deal with the concept of respect:

The Hopi people believe in sharing. The life-giving generosity of the Katsinam is meant for all, Hopi and non-Hopi alike. However, as with the Hopi, the responsibility for mutual respect between the Katsinam and humankind is incumbent upon us as well. Thus, when the image of a Katsinam is taken in vain to decorate a beer mug, a cocktail swizzle stick, a comic book cover, or a swimsuit, then it is the responsibility of all of us to protest. Likewise, when a Katsina image is used out of context to support a non-Hopi philosophy or religious concept, then this appropriation must be challenged. The Katsinam are not toys nor



commercial decorations, but powerful, benevolent beings who appreciate gratitude expressed for their kindness. If that respect is not offered, they reserve the right to recall their gift, rescind the covenant, and leave humankind to fend for itself.

For the Hopi this would be unacceptable. Without the Katsinam their life would be diminished. Accordingly, they ask you to assist them in strengthening the bond between all of us through your expression of respect for the beings shown in painting and sculpture within this gallery. Embrace the beauty of the Katsina for in it is the embodiment of life.

## COLLABORATION

Respectful display of items probably cannot be accomplished by non-Indians without the guidance of members of the appropriate tribe. Felton Bricker Sr. (Mohave) suggests:

Museums should invite Native people to visit their institution when they are installing a show that represents their Tribal group. This would be the best way to get the "Native voice" and to be sure you have accurate representation of their people. NAGPRA has taken us to new places, but museums still have a long way to go. (as cited in Ogden, 2004, p.97)

But seeking guidance and developing a truly collaborative relationship may not be as straightforward as it first seems. Once again, this is because of basic cultural differences. Tony R. Chavarria (Santa Clara Pueblo), curator at the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture/Laboratory of Anthropology, gave a talk at the 2004 annual meeting of the Western Association of Art Conservators titled "Structural Fills: Preservation and Conservation in a Museum of Living Anthropology." He makes several important points. "If a museum is to act in consultation with indigenous groups, there must be a shift in how these interactions develop and how success is mapped" (Chavarria, 2005, p. 23). He calls attention to creating symbiotic investments in each other:

Progress should not be measured in results such as repatriations, but in the ongoing dialog with tribes. The consultation process can be a method to establish a level of trust and understanding; the prospect is to create ongoing relationships with governments and people. The experience is symbiotic. Over time, tribal representatives will have a deeper insight into the museum, its mission, staff, and collections; and the museum will gain a deeper understanding of the cultures it represents. By open and quiet dialogue, respect and a fragile trust can be built and always must be nurtured. Repatriation is not always a conclusion. Consultation and beneficial relationship is the ongoing hope. (p. 24)

He says elsewhere with regard to the sensitive subject of repatriation: "We only need to find a shared level to communicate" (p. 23), and he

notes that "By seeking dialogue rather than repatriation, our interactions turn from being between a museum and tribal authority, to a quiet talk of common interests" (pp. 23–24).

### MUSEUMS AND THE INTANGIBLE

This brings us again to the discussions of intangible heritage at the 2004 ICOM conference. Sid Ahmed Baghli, the cultural advisor, permanent delegation of Algeria to UNESCO, states: "intangible assets and elements have, alas, been neglected and forgotten. In many countries, they have become the poor relations of culture" (2004, p. 15). He goes on to say: "Rethinking the role of museums has become strategic in the battle to safeguard and valorize our increasingly numerous, valuable and fragile cultural assets. The very definition of the museum (*ICOM Statutes*, Art. 2) needs to be reviewed and its scope widened" (p. 16).

Richard Kurin (2004) asks, "Can museums really safeguard intangible cultural heritage?" (p. 7). He points out:

In order to deal with intangible cultural heritage museums must have an extensive, fully engaged, substantive dialogue and partnership with the people who hold the heritage. Such partnership entails shared authority for defining traditions, and shared curation for their representation. Museums cannot resort to the controlled re-creation of idealized or romanticized living culture performed by scripted actors, but must instead deal with heritage as it is lived by real people. Nor can museums hide behind a history of elitism, ethnic, or class bias that has often afflicted the institution. Charged with the twin duties of cooperation and respect, museums will have to cross all sorts of boundaries that have sometimes kept them "above and beyond" the broader populace. (pp. 7–8)

Nowhere is this more evident than in the proliferation of American vernacular memorial art that we see today. This art by common people, rather than trained artists, often created as a response to grief, commemorates events and individuals. Events like the 9/11 collapse of the Twin Towers, the Oklahoma City bombing, and automobile accidents on highways result in public and collective expressions of mourning and remembrance. Individuals being remembered range from the anonymous or unknown, such as the victims of genocide, to the well-publicized, such as Princess Diana or children from the Red Lake Indian Reservation in Minnesota.

In her presentation on vernacular memorial art at the 2005 AIC annual meeting, Lauren Farber, paper conservator, pointed out the ethical and conservation issues these spontaneous shrines raise for museums and cultural centers in determining how and even if they should be preserved. She points out that this art "has begun to significantly impact museum collections as well as civic life, and to raise unique and important issues in art conservation and museological ethics" (2005, p. 5). She continues,

"These new vernacular forms have affected the attitudes and policies of public institutions and the design and development of public memorial sites and museums" (p. 6). These memorials are expressions of our society today, of our popular culture. We do not usually perceive our collective popular culture as one of an indigenous people, but in preserving the intangible aspects of it there are many similarities.

## LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Having spent more than three decades as a practicing conservator and consultant in the field of cultural heritage preservation, I have observed several trends while the profession has evolved. Technological and economic developments have caused us to look at preservation in new ways and to change our approach to its management. To a large extent, the field has gone from single item conservation, which focuses on the treatment of one object at a time, to preventive conservation, which endeavors to make the most effective use of new technologies to preserve not just single items but entire collections (Ogden, 1997, p. 164).

Now the perspective seems to be broadening again, at least with regard to objects connected to indigenous people. The focus is shifting to preserving cultures, rather than just single items or collections of items. Objects are preserved as an aid in preserving cultures, and their intangible as well as their tangible aspects are playing a role in developing preservation methodologies. This new perspective presents special challenges. It raises questions about the spiritual and cultural nature of items and how to ensure that this aspect of them is protected. Issues of use, storage, and display need to be considered within the context of a particular culture's concepts of preservation.

A general understanding of various cultural practices and points of view, and a respect for these on the part of everyone involved are key to the appropriate care of cultural heritage. In September 2007, the Canadian Conservation Institute will hold a symposium titled "Preserving Aboriginal Heritage: Technical and Traditional Approaches." It is intended to provide "an opportunity for Aboriginal people and conservation specialists to learn from one another—in an atmosphere of mutual respect—about traditional, technical, ethical, and intangible aspects of the conservation of Aboriginal material culture" (Canadian Conservation Institute, n.d.). I hope and believe that this will prove to be just one of many opportunities for developing the active dialogue and mutually beneficial collaboration that are critical for the future of cultural heritage preservation.

## NOTES

1. It should be noted that no individual receives royalties from the sale of the book *Caring for American Indian Objects: A Practical and Cultural Guide*; all proceeds go to the Minnesota Historical Society to support its programs. Also, the book was distributed to nearly three hundred tribal institutions nationwide. This distribution was made possible by grants from

the Bay and Paul Foundations and the George A. MacPherson Charitable Trust, and it was carried out under the guidance of an advisory committee of American Indian museum professionals.

2. The acronym *NAGPRA* is commonly used to refer to the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act:

On November, 16, 1990, President George Bush signed this act into law. It addresses the rights of lineal descendants, Indian tribes, and native Hawaiian organizations to certain American human remains, funerary objects, sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony with which they are affiliated. (Ogden, 2004, p. 243)

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